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OSCAR WILDE AS A CRITIC

BY ALICE I. PERRY WOOD

IN Oscar Wilde as a late growth of that later Renaissance which was seen in part in the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, there is an increasing interest. And indeed, now that more than a decade has passed since his death, it is easier to see where he stands, and to estimate his contribution to his age.

In his *De Profundis* Wilde says of himself, in his self-analytic, self-conscious way: "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realized this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realize it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their own life-time, and have it so acknowledged. It is usually discerned, if discerned at all, by the historian, or the critic, long after both the man and his age have passed away. With me it was different. I felt it myself, and made others feel it. Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope." In another passage he says: "I am a born antinomian." It was his wish to be considered an anamoly, unique, always different. Thus, "When people agree with me I always feel that I must be wrong." Perhaps it was his love of paradox which caused Wilde to believe that, by virtue of his antinomianism, he held this symbolic relation to his age,—that thus he separated and made apparent the subconscious strains in English thought and feeling. That England should recognize itself when thus brought face to face with æstheticism is not a necessity, according to Wilde's idea of the relation of the critic to his age; rather it added to his satisfaction, as an antinomian, to *épater le bourgeois*; it kept in emphasis that symbolic relation by the forced attention which he demanded.

It is this phase that is particularly interesting in Wilde's

position in the criticism of his day, especially in his work in what he calls "the art-literature of the nineteenth century," and it is in this connection that Wilde may be allied with the tendencies in English art, and with that development of the Pre-Raphaelite doctrine and usage, that showed itself especially in the work of Walter Pater. This later connection, noted by many, was not entirely grateful to Pater; he was a little amazed, it appears, by the rather emphatic discipleship of Wilde, and, as one biographer says, "both disgusted and appalled" by the recklessness with which his fatherhood was claimed for the extravagances of certain of his followers. And it must be confessed that the student of Pater's æsthetic theory is perhaps in somewhat the same state of mind. Wilde, with his sunflowers and æstheticism, is apt, at times, to dodge behind these theories like a ridiculous or evil imp, or, if you will, a kind of Frankenstein, an embodied *reductio ad absurdum*, a caricature of some of the most passionate, most severely chastened and ordered of Pater's work.

To the constant assertion that, in his æsthetic excesses, Wilde was but carrying out Pater's ideas expressed in the Conclusion to the *Renaissance*, an answer is found in a comparison of *Dorian Gray* with *Marius the Epicurean*, with its high, ethical purpose and spiritual reach. But that Wilde gave but partial or contorted interpretation to Pater's ideas is not a sufficient explanation to account for so keen a critic and so eager a disciple, and so signal a failure. In these self-confessions there is a note of fatefulness, of the recognition of weakness of will against the very temptations presented by his alertness and intellectual curiosity, a consciousness of organic and native limitations, which are later shown in *De Profundis*. But more than this, there is also a real disparity, and a conscious departure on the part of Wilde from the position of Pater. Nowhere is this better seen than in their critical theories. It is in this connection that I wish to consider Wilde especially, to show his derivation through Pater, from the most notable art-theory of the later nineteenth century, and his subsequent development into a theory of criticism quite at variance with this, but into a type of criticism which is still felt in our art-theory of to-day, and is concomitant with later Impressionism. Wilde is the expression in criticism of this, as truly as was Ruskin of Pre-Raphaelitism. And his life, in its self-centered interests and energy, its disregard of anything alien to the satis-

faction of those interests, its insistence upon the value of "doing nothing," its constant eagerness for exploring the world of subjective experience, its aloofness and disinterestedness shown constantly in love of paradox in thought and of eccentricity in action, is a background for this art-theory which is truly expressive of it.

Comparing, then, their ideas of criticism, we may take the Preface to *The Renaissance* as a conclusive summing up of Pater's critical theory.

The æsthetic critic . . . regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. This influence he feels and wishes to explain, analyzing it, and reducing it to its elements. To him, the picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book, *La Gioconda*, the hills of Carrara, Pico of Mirandola, are valuable for their virtues, as we say, in speaking of a herb, a wine, a gem; for the property each has of affecting one with a special, a unique, impression of pleasure. . . . And the function of the æsthetic critic is to distinguish, analyze, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others. . . .

What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. He will remember always that beauty exists in many forms. To him all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal. . . . The question he asks is always: In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself?

This theory, as we find here and in repeated criticism, rests upon the idea of beauty as *expressiveness*, and is connected with the theory of style that gives as the ultimate problem the finding of the unique word. The critic's chief qualification is susceptibility to beauty, and the critic's aim is the disengaging of the particular phase of beauty, or the *virtue* of a work of art, that he may show in whom "the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period" found itself. It is to this aspect of criticism that Oscar Wilde was introduced both by the lectures of Ruskin and by the teaching of Pater, the two chief influences of his Oxford days. In

Wilde's criticism, as in Pater's declaration in his Preface, all criticism is based upon the susceptibility of the critic. Thus his statement that "Temperament is the primary requisite for the critic—a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and to the various impressions that beauty gives us," corresponds to the requirement that Pater makes, of "a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects."

When we turn to Wilde's explanation of what the æsthetic experience consists in, we find the typical term to be *satisfying*. Thus, in the Envoi to *Rose-Leaf and Apple-Leaf* by Rennell Rodd (one of Wilde's most complete critical essays) we see that he defines "joy in art" as "that incommunicable element of artistic delight which, in poetry, for instance, comes from what Keats called the 'sensuous life of verse,' the element of song in the singing, made so pleasurable to us by that wonder of motion which often has its origin in mere musical impulse, and in painting is to be sought for, from subject never, but from the pictorial charm only—the scheme and symphony of color, the satisfying beauty of design." Again, in speaking of modern painting, he declares that the quality "comes from the mere inventive and creative handling of line and color, from a certain form and choice of beautiful workmanship, which, rejecting all literary reminiscence and all metaphysical idea, is in itself entirely satisfying to the æsthetic sense, is, as the Greeks would say, an end in itself." Pater's idea of the æsthetic experience is only vaguely given as "pleasurable sensations," but we may fill out this phrase from his utterances in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, where the life of æsthetic appreciation is described as the power "to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy"; and as marked by a "quickened sense of life," by a "quickened, multiplied consciousness,"—expressions not so different from those of Wilde, but rather involving closer analysis. The difference, as Pater showed plainly in a later essay, lay in the scope of satisfaction.

But while Pater insists on the susceptibility of the critic, and upon the end of the æsthetic experience as "quickened, multiplied consciousness," and declares that art gives "the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake," yet in his criticism, in the attitude which he takes toward those "moments" of "poetic

passion," the end he proposes for his "quickened, multiplied consciousness," is entirely different from that of Wilde. The requirements for the critic are fundamentally the same, the experience in each case is "enthusiastic activity"; but it is the view taken of the value of the experience, or, in other words, of the function of the critic and of criticism, that differentiates them.

Pater, by the very use of the word *virtue*, suggests, to a certain degree, an objective, a *social* conception of criticism that Wilde's theory entirely lacks. The Conclusion to *The Renaissance* must be interpreted in the light of his practise. One needs only to compare Pater's essay on Botticelli, or on Wordsworth, with Wilde's on Rennell Rodd, to see the entirely different attitude suggested in the words *virtue* or *expressiveness* by the one, and *impression* and *satisfying* by the other. Pater uses this susceptibility as a revelatory agent, as a solvent which shall bring to crystallization the elements that make for the significance or the appeal of a work of art, which may indicate the line of possible sympathy between the artist or author and the observer or reader. This is seen in Pater's description of the ideal method of procedure for the æsthetic critic, in the Preface to *The Renaissance*, where, after defining the "unique, incommunicable faculty" of Wordsworth, he says, "Well! that is the *virtue*, the active principle, in Wordsworth's poetry; and then the function of the critic of Wordsworth is to follow up that active principle, to disengage it, to mark the degree in which it penetrates his verse." And in his essay on Wordsworth, Pater carefully shows that "the writings of Wordsworth are the central and elementary expression" of that which is "a large element in the complexion of modern poetry." In other words, the work of the critic is not accomplished in the mere noting or entering pleasantly into the quality of a work of art, but must also include its identification with some larger entity.

Wilde uses this susceptibility to gain impressions, as of value in themselves, for he says of the critic: "The sole aim is to cherish his own impressions." Again, "That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul," for it "is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another." His justification for this view of criticism rests in the facts of the development of art, for "the ultimate expression of our

artistic movement in painting has been, not in the spiritual visions of the Pre-Raphaelites, for all their marvel of Greek legend and their mystery of Italian song, but in the work of such men as Whistler and Albert Moore, who have raised design and color to the ideal level of poetry and music." He continues: "Now, this increased sense of the absolutely satisfying value of beautiful workmanship, this recognition of the primary importance of the sensuous element in art, this love of art for art's sake, is the point in which we of the younger school have made a departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin—a departure definite and different and decisive." What had in the work of Pater constituted a basis for a definition of beauty, and could, therefore, be justly called an æsthetic,—an æsthetic with its basis in the idea of expressiveness,—is here denied as being the foundation of the critic's search. With Wilde, the critic's ultimate duty is to record the perception of beauty—not by way of analysis, rather in effusion. The eloquent passages of the essay on Rennell Rodd or the fantastic utterances of "The Critic as Artist," placed beside Pater's thoughtful building up of a consistent and unforgettable portrayal in "Botticelli" or "Pico della Mirandola," show such a difference.

Beginning with the statement that "The highest criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely," Wilde leads on to the conclusion that "to the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises." Further, he says, "Criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance than is the work of poet or sculptor." And again, "No ignoble considerations of probability, that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life, affect it ever." He admits that "the primary aim of the critic is to see the thing as in itself it really is not." Thus the work of art may be inferior or unusual; it is all one to the impressionist in criticism, or, as he phrases it, in criticism as "a creative art." And later he states, "The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one chooses to see." He adds that the critic will turn "to such works as make him brood and dream and fancy, to works that possess the subtle quality of suggestion." He states this theory more precisely in the following paragraph:

The sculptor gladly surrenders imitative colour; and the painter the actual dimensions of form, because by such renunciations they are able to avoid too definite a presentation of the Ideal, which would be too purely intellectual. It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the æsthetic sense alone, which, while accepting both reason and recognition as stages of apprehension, subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, and, taking whatever alien emotional elements the work may possess, uses their very complexity as a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression itself. You see, then, how it is that the æsthetic critic rejects those obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final. Some resemblance, no doubt, the creative work of the critic will have to the work that has stirred him to creation, but it will be such resemblance as exists, not between Nature and the mirror that the painter or landscape or figure may be supposed to hold up to her, but between Nature and the work of the decorative artist. . . . The critic reproduces the work that he criticises in a mode that is never imitative, and part of whose charm may really consist in the rejection of resemblance, and shows us in this way not merely the meaning but also the mystery of Beauty, and, by transforming each art into literature, solves once for all the problem of art's unity.

We find the same difference in the practise of Pater and of Wilde. Pater, in his self-analysis in *The Child in the House*, says: "For him, everywhere, that sensible vehicle or occasion became, perhaps only too surely, the necessary concomitant of any perception of things, real enough to be of any weight or reckoning, in his house of thought. There were times when he could think of the necessity he was under of associating all thoughts to touch and sight, . . . a protest in favor of real men and women against mere gray, unreal abstractions. . . . But certainly, he came more and more to be unable to care for or think of soul but as in actual body, or of any world but that wherein are water and trees, and where men and women look, so or so, and press actual hands." For Pater, the "imaginative reality" *resides* in line and color and pose, and can never be felt completely except through these "sensible attachments," as he calls them. Wilde speaks of the "fine contempt for Nature," the "dim, dull abyss of facts"; and again, "The best that

one can say of most modern creative art is that it is just a little less vulgar than reality, and so the critic, with his fine sense of distinction and sure instinct of delicate refinement, will prefer to look into the silver mirror or through the woven veil, and will turn his eyes away from the chaos and clamour of actual existence, though the mirror be tarnished, and the veil be torn." With such a theory, the object criticised necessarily falls from view, and the experience of the soul in the presence of the object of art takes its place. Every reader or beholder is a creator even as it is that creation which forms the material of the critical product. Thus Wilde insists that criticism is creation; Pater calls it appreciation.

In departing from Pater's position with such a result, Wilde is brought to the characteristic attitude of those French artists and writers with whom we find him in sympathetic intercourse during his residence in Paris, namely, the Impressionists and the Symbolists. These had undoubtedly exercised a strong influence upon him, an influence which is perhaps most directly seen in Wilde's poems and in his drama, *Salome*. In this, as in the work of the Symbolists, we have effects gained through a kind of refrain-like repetition, significant silences, indefinite persons, absorbing moods, and a constant appeal to sound. And in their general theory we find the Symbolists aiming at "a pure synthetic impression," depending much upon the association of ideas, preferring the indefinite and suggestive rather than the precise, and in every case emphasizing the subjective and individual nature of literary production. The most fruitful of their speculations, as their critics have pointed out, has resulted in an exposition of the creative function of the reader. This, it is seen, corresponds closely to the ultimate conclusion of Wilde's criticism.

One can, of course, find in Pater not only the essential basis of creative criticism, but, as well, an example of it in the famous La Giaconda passage from the essay on Leonardo da Vinci; but such a passage, it has been recognized by critics, is almost unique in its extremely associative appeal, and certainly cannot be paralleled in the more mature work of Pater. In *Appreciations*, for instance, we have a similar disparity between Pater's later work and the passage mentioned, as between the theory of Pater and that of his enthusiastic disciple, Oscar Wilde. And this passage is the

one from Pater's work that Wilde quotes as illustrating his idea of creative criticism, and as being most in opposition to that other theory which gives its aim as "to see the object as in itself it really is."

In the dictum that art must not imitate,—for art must not say anything,—lies, not only his connection with the Symbolists, but, according to his own confession, his point of departure from the so-called Impressionists. "I am very fond of the work of many of the Impressionist painters of Paris and London. Subtlety and distinction have not yet left the school. . . . Their white keynote, with its variations in lilac, was an era in color. . . . Yet they will insist on treating painting as if it were a mode of autobiography invented for the use of the illiterate, and are always prating to us on their coarse, gritty canvases of their unnecessary selves and their unnecessary opinions, and spoiling by a vulgar over-emphasis that fine contempt of Nature which is the best and only modest thing about them. One tires, at the end, of the work of individuals whose individuality is always noisy, and generally uninteresting." He prefers "that newer school at Paris, the *Archaicistes*, as they call themselves, who, . . . rejecting the tedious realism of those who merely paint what they see, try to see something worth seeing, and to see it not merely with actual and physical vision, but with that nobler vision of the soul which is as far wider in spiritual scope as it is far more splendid in artistic purpose." Further he says, "Still, the art that is frankly decorative is the art to live with. It is, of all our visible arts, the one art that creates in us both mood and temperament. Mere color, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways. . . . By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty, as well as of the imitative method of the ordinary painter, decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement. . . . To be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic." And as Wilde departed from the Impressionists in his ideas, so he approaches the theory voiced by the later school of artists, the Neo-Impressionists or Post-Impressionists.

A sympathetic critic of the work of the Post-Impressionists at the Grafton Gallery in 1911, Mr. Roger Fry, speaks of

these artists as "freed from the incubus of complete representation," and says further, "Post-Impressionist artists have discovered empirically that to make allusion to a natural object of any kind vivid to the imagination, it is not only not necessary to give it illusive likeness, but that such illusion of actuality really spoils its imaginative reality."

Perhaps it is not unfair to take the utterances of the later exponents of this school to show the tendency of their theory of art. Thus in a recent book called *Cubism*, by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, we read: "Let the picture imitate nothing; let it nakedly present its motive, and we shall indeed be ungrateful were we to deplore the absence of all those things—flowers, or landscape, or faces—whose mere reflection it might have been. Nevertheless, let us admit that the reminiscence of natural forms cannot be absolutely banished; as yet, at all events. An art cannot be raised to the level of a pure effusion at the first step." And "We seek the essential, but we seek it in our personality, and not in a sort of eternity, laboriously divided by mathematicians and philosophers." And Cubism, I believe, may be taken here not in any restricted sense, but as synonymous for the art that dates from Cézanne and includes the present school of "profound realism" (to use their own term) as distinguished from the "superficial realism" of the Impressionists.

I have given Wilde's theory thus in detail, in its relation to Pater's idea of criticism, because it is in this relation that its peculiar interest lies,—in its fundamental agreement with it, and its ultimately wide departure from it. We see here an interesting parallel in the case of Wilde and Pater to the advance of the art-theory in the last half of the nineteenth century. In Pater, we may trace the theory of criticism as it runs parallel to the art-theory of the Pre-Raphaelites; in Wilde, we come to a later kind of criticism which, in the creative field, is paralleled by the appearance of paintings illustrating a view of art that, while it derives from the Pre-Raphaelite theory of expressiveness as the basis of beauty, puts the emphasis upon the subjective experience of the artist rather than upon the attempt to communicate and share those experiences. As we noted, one is inevitably impressed by Wilde's close alliance with the Post-Impressionists. But between him and our present Post-Impressionists there is the same difference as between the Pre-Raphaelites and the

earlier Impressionists, that is, in the choice of subjects; the present-day artists keeping close to the life about them, Wilde dealing still with the remote and strange as most fit to set up the train of pleasurable associations.

The tendency of this "new" æstheticism, the possible value of it, is not unlike that which we hope to derive from the art of the Post-Impressionists and their successors. The most unsympathetic may feel, I believe, that while the newest art seems perverse in choice of subject, and goes to such extremes (as the writers upon Cubism themselves confess) as "juxtaposing the six faces of a cube or the two ears of a model seen in profile," yet it does attempt to widen the field of art by dealing subjectively and sometimes profoundly with the volatile and subtle notions of depth, motion, etc., and by weighing and appreciating interrelations that are often overlooked. The value that may come from this new æsthetic criticism lies in the same direction of individual dealing with experience, which has already been claimed for the Symbolists, and has given rise to the modern and valuable conception of what we mean by *creative* reading, or *creative* observation. It is in this direction that the criticism of Wilde, deriving from that of Pater, tends.

The value of this new æsthetic criticism, however, is certainly limited by its strongly individualistic and subjective nature, which, on the one hand, does not give us any psychological analysis of the æsthetic experience (the ideal process being, as we see, effusion), nor on the other hand any social conception of the function of the critic such as one gets from the earlier æsthetic criticism of Walter Pater,—who in England, at least, is the point of departure for this later theory.

This scant review of Wilde's critical theory brings out his symbolic relation to his age. He is touched by the modern spirit in many ways, he suggests in his work many phases of recent thought upon art and literature. Because of this, even a *flâneur*, one who trifled with and abused life, is worthy of study by those who would observe the modern spirit in its growth.

Alice I. Perry Wood.